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ABSTRACT

A total of 20 boys and girls from grades 1, 4, 7, and 11 were interviewed on the topic of deviant behavior among their peers. They were also asked to make deviance judgments on two story characters whose behaviors exemplified qualities that typically evoke an attribution of psychological disorder on the part of adult judges. One story described loss of control and aggression, the other a distorted and paranoid perception of social reality. The pattern of reaction to the stories was consistent with age-related shifts in the basis for deviant status. First graders generally failed to think in terms of group norms; the transition from the middle grades to adolescence was marked by greater emphasis on social consensus, both in psychological perspective and group behavior. (Author/GO)

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The Perception of Deviance and Disorder:

A Developmental Perspective*

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One stimulus for the research I'm about to describe came from some experiences with children while consulting in the public schools. Through our casual encounters with children in the halls or on the school grounds, we came to realize that our identity as psychologists had very different meaning for children of different ages. This fact was highlighted by a special form of peer group humor that would characteristically involve myself and one of the children as central characters. This particular comedy routine would typically open with a member of the group asking me if I were the psychiatrist (sic). As I would nod in affirmation, one reluctant and giggling member of the group would be thrust in front of me, and it would be announced, to the general merriment of all but the two of us, that this was someone who needed to see me. Over time, it became clear that this routine rarely took place with children much below junior high age. With high school students there was always a more hesitant undertone to the routine--as though these adolescents were not just sure where the joking left off and the truth began.

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As we thought about this phenomenon in the light of developmental research on social perception, we realized that these episodes reflected the beginnings

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of a social judgment of great importance in adult life--namely, the attribution of psychological disorder. The importance of the disorder judgment does not lie in the frequency with which it occurs in adult life, but in the consequences of the attribution itself. In contrast to other judgments with negative implications, such as morality or popularity, the attribution of disorder reduces its target to something less than fully human status. If we examine the way the disorder category is used among laymen we see that disorder represents that which is unpredictable, and hence that which can have dangerous implications.

According to one major theory, disorder is attributed to those forms of deviance that do not fit into other existing, definable categories of deviance, such as immorality or criminality. Disorder is thus a residual category of disorder--to be applied to behaviors not accounted for by other social judgment categories. It therefore follows that the disorder judgment is derivative from other judgments. That is, that it emerges as a category of judgment for the child only when other categories such as morality and competency are well established, and when the child encounters events that seem not to fit them. Although we do not have time to develop the argument here, our analysis suggests that the form of logical comparisons required to make such a judgment match those of formal thought operations.

This line of thinking led us to explore the nature of deviant status in the peer group across a wide cross-sectional age span. Of particular interest to us were changes in the type of social comparison represented in the attribution of deviant status. By such an inquiry we hoped to discover the

point at which children become sensitive to that which adults refer to as irrationality--the manifestation of behavior that does not fit into rationally conceived categories.

We utilized two inquiry strategies in our cross-sectional survey. First, we simply asked children of different ages to describe children whom they considered to be markedly different from most of their peers. Next we presented subjects with controlled stimuli--brief stories--and asked them to make deviance judgments about the story figures and to discuss the basis for their judgments. The stories were constructed to portray characteristics of behavior that, among adult judges, typically evoke attributions of disorder. In our survey of research on the laymen's conception of mental illness, we found two types of behavior most characteristic of that which exemplifies psychological disorder for adults: One type involves the person with an extremely deviant perception of life events, that is, a person who has delusions or hallucinations. The other type is a person who loses control of himself, usually in a manner that is physically dangerous to others.

We constructed two stories: one was about a child with a seriously distorted social perspective and the other about a child who often lost control of himself. We asked subjects to make deviance judgments about these story figures. We then asked them to explain the basis for their judgments, much the way children in moral judgment stories are interviewed. From these ratings and discussions we then made inferences about our subjects' recognition of the disorder elements contained in the stories.

We conducted tape recorded interviews with 10 girls and 10 boys from each of four grades--first, fourth, seventh, and eleventh grades.* These interviews were done at the end of the school year to maximize the familiarity of children with their grade level peers. The approximate mean ages of the four groups were approximately 7, 10, 13 and 17 years. Subjects came from predominantly white, middle class backgrounds. Interviewers were of the same sex as the child interviewed.

The first half of the interview began with a discussion of the many ways people are different from one another. Subjects were then asked to tell the interviewer about children they know who behave differently from most other children. They were asked to discuss the things these children do that most other children would think are different. These interview segments were transcribed and given code numbers to mask identities of subjects. Two raters then categorized the responses into a set of categories derived from pilot analyses of types of deviance. These data are described in Table 1.

The two largest categories of deviance were Aggression and Social Norm Violations. These accounted for over half the responses. (Note that subjects usually mentioned more than one deviant peer, although no one mentioned more than three.) Aggression included physical aggression against other children, destruction of property, verbal assault, and temper tantrums. There were no significant age differences for this category as a whole, although for the subcategory of physical aggression against other children 12 of the 16 nominations came from first and fourth graders.

As you can see from Table 1, very few first graders mentioned behaviors categorized as Social Norm Violations ($\underline{X}^2 = 7.87$, $\underline{df} = 3$, $p < .05$), that is such things as showing off, acting silly, and other violations of peer codes. Conversely, first graders were the only group to make frequent reference to children whose interests differed from their own interests (rather than the peer group, as was asked of them) or with whom they have some personal grievance. Added to this were 5 first graders whose responses were deemed non-scorable because they seemed not to comprehend the thrust of the question. All of this suggests that while seven year old children clearly understand the concept of difference and similarity, they do not as yet view the behavior of their individual peers in terms of group behavior patterns. They seem to lack a working conception of peer group norms. As one would expect from the moral judgment literature, and as we will see in the data from the second half of the interview, most children at this age are focused on the immediate consequences of behavior, and do not impose a social interpretation on behavior. We might say that the concept of social deviance is not yet a meaningful form of social comparison for first grade children.

Fourth graders, interestingly enough, were the only group to make significant mention of children who violated adult rules, that is children who stole, used bad language or disobeyed teachers. This age group thus exemplified both appreciation of group reference and a strong sense of obligation to adult rules.

The remaining deviance category of interest to us is Social Withdrawal.

Only eleventh graders made frequent reference to peers who were social isolates--those who moved on the fringes of group interactions in the school situation. Such adolescents were described as having few friends. In almost each instance our 11th grade subjects described peers who lacked a sense of the subtleties of peer group social codes and the nuances of social interaction. They seemed either unable or unwilling to engage in group interaction.

The overall pattern that emerges from this data is one of increasing salience of the peer group:, first, as a frame of reference for behavior, even so far as adherence to adult rules is concerned; but finally because it has become important to be able to relate adequately to the peer group and be sensitive to the nuances of social norms--even when one consciously chooses to disregard these norms. This last point--the conscious rejection of peer pressure--was brought out by the respectful mention of 3 or 4 individuals who were perceived as different from most other peers in a positive sense.

In all of our data on actual peer deviance there was very little mention of the internal status of the deviant individuals. That is, no mention, save by four high school subjects and one junior high student, of individuals with a distorted perception of life events, who, in a word, think crazy thoughts. While some high school students spoke of peers who had psychological problems these problems usually involved feelings of inadequacy or insecurity--not of deviant intentions borne of a different construction of reality. Thus we see that most children and adolescents do not recall encountering irrational behavior, as adults define it, in their everyday experience. The closest to this is their

experience with temper tantrums. Our next question, then, is at what point in development are children able to articulate the adult criteria for disorder when confronted with examples of behavior that match these criteria.

In the second half of the interviews, subjects were told they were going to hear about some children of our acquaintance, children not from their school. They were asked to listen to these descriptions and decide how different these two children seemed in comparison with most children they knew. (The order of the stories was counterbalanced for each cell of the design and questioning took place after each story. The sex of the story figure matched that of the subject.) The stories were as follows:

Loss of control story: We'll call this boy Bill. He is a boy about your age. He is in the _____ grade, too. Recently, Bill has been getting into fights for no real reason. Sometimes little things set him off, and he will start shouting and screaming at other children. When asked about why he keeps getting into fights, he says he doesn't know why, he just can't stop.

Distorted perception story: We'll call this boy Peter. He is a boy about your age. He is in the _____ grade, too. Recently, Peter has been telling his parents and his teachers that the other children are talking about him, and he thinks they are out to get him even though they've never done anything to him. Every day after school, Peter goes home a different way so that no one can follow him.

We have two kinds of data that speak to children's developing recognition of the qualities of behavior that evoke an attribution of psychological disorder

from most adults: the deviance ratings of the two story figures and the analysis of children's discussions of these two figures. First let us consider the analysis of children's discussions of these stories in order to better appreciate just what the children were responding to in their ratings. Recall that after assigning a deviance rating to the story figure, subjects were asked to state the basis for their rating ("What is it that Peter does that makes him different from most kids?") and then were asked to try to explain the character's behavior. In so doing, the children provided us with their understanding of the story. From these discussions we can see which parts were fully recognized and understood by subjects and which were ignored or reconstructed by them. Raters sorted these protocol segments into three categories:

(1) The first we call Recognition. In these cases the subject essentially reported the story as it was told him. The basis for attributing deviant status to the story figure was his distortion of reality or his failure to control himself. In the case of the Distorted Perception story the subject construed the fearful behavior of the story figure as based on a distorted and inaccurate view of events. Subjects in this category said such things as "his imagination is running away with him," or "he just thinks other kids are after him, but it's not so," or some even called the figure paranoid and explained the term.

(2) The second category we termed Reconstruction. These subjects reconstructed the story in such a manner as to normalize the actor's behavior. In so doing they omitted key elements of the story and added new elements. Thus, for example, the fearful child was described as justifiably afraid of children

who were actually out to get him. In some cases he was described as having actually been beaten up. In other words, they reconstructed the story as though other children had actually threatened the story figure. Sometimes the actor was seen as having provoked the other children (by tattling) or that the other children were jealous of the actor's good grades. For these children the actor's perspective was always viewed as appropriate to the situation. Similar kinds of reconstructions were made for the loss of control story.

(3) A third category was necessary in order to properly describe those subjects who seemed to be in a genuinely transitional state. These subjects appreciated the fact that in one case the actor's perspective was seriously distorted, or in the other case, that he had lost control; but as they continued to talk about the actor they reverted to attempts at normalizing the actor's behavior in the ways we have described as "reconstructions."

Table 2 shows the distribution of category ratings by grade level for each of the stories. (For the statistical analysis, the categories of transition and recognition were collapsed to enhance the reliability of the chi-square analysis.) Significant age trends were found for both stories (Loss of Control: $\underline{X}^2 = 27.36$, $\underline{df} = 3$, $\underline{p} < .001$; Distorted Perspective: $\underline{X}^2 = 30.32$, $\underline{df} = 3$, $\underline{p} < .001$). The linear patterns of increasing recognition and accomodation were similar for the two stories. (The term accomodation is used in the Piagetian sense--to describe the child's having made a cognitive adjustment to something new.) First grade subjects invariably reconstructed the stories in the normaling fashion, failing to take account of the disorder components

in each story. What was so striking about their responses, as well as those of older children who also reconstructed the stories, was the fact these children were not at all puzzled or perplexed by the stories. For the older subjects (those placed in the recognition category) the stories were puzzling and paradoxical. These subjects recognized the nakedly irrational qualities of behavior portrayed and were perplexed by them. As one adolescent put it, "But I've never, I've never really seen anybody like that or heard of anybody like that. I mean I'd hate to think that they thought I was after them or something like that. They must really be scared of people, or think they are really doing something wrong . . ." Younger subjects, on the other hand, seemed to have translated the stories into events and characters they could readily understand their reconstructions of the stories spoke of bullies and tattletales, intentional fighting and revenge. For these children, aggressive behavior was always either a result of genuine provocation or of a pervasively aggressive character (e.g., someone who just likes to fight). Similarly, fearfulness was always perceived to be a result of direct, overt threat. For these younger subjects, there was very little to be explained, as regards the behavior of the story figures. By reconstructing the stories to contain a different set of facts, the younger children had already built in their explanations of the events. Those older subjects who recognized the "irrational" aspects of behavior embedded in the stories, found themselves in the position of having to clarify that irrationality rather than negate it. These subjects were forced to wrestle with the problem of explanation (those labelled as "recognition" subjects by raters) and in so doing

they became involved in a very different form of social perspective taking and social judgment than the younger subjects. Some subjects (transition S) recognized the problem and reverted back to the forms of social explanation with which they were familiar.

Let me speak briefly of the deviance ratings made by our subjects and then summarize the implications of our findings for the development study of social judgment. The means for these deviance ratings are found in Table 3. (The deviance ratings made by first graders were excluded from this analysis since, as we noted earlier, most first graders did not seem to be making normative comparisons when asked to think of children who were different from most peers. We thus concluded that this rating would not hold the same meaning for first graders as for the rest of our subjects.) There was a significant main effect for grade level for the Distorted Perspective story ($F = 3.44$; $df = 2.57$; $p < .05$) but not for the Loss of Control story. The linear trend of increasing attributed deviance for the somewhat paranoid story figure is congruent with our previous finding of increasing recognition of the distorted reality testing of the story figure. As children come to appreciate the fact that this story figure has a deviant perception of social reality, they assign him (her) an increasingly deviant status. This is particularly clear from some of the adolescent interview protocols.

The pattern of findings is not so straightforward for the loss of control story figure. All grade levels rated this figure at a moderately high level of deviance. (Despite the pattern of means, there was not a significant sex x

grade level interaction effect for this story.) Our opinion is that this state of affairs is a consequence of having used a story that combines loss of control with aggression. Although this combination is a particularly salient example of loss of control, it is clear from the data on peer deviance that aggression, by itself, holds somewhat different meaning across the age levels spanned by our sample. It is our opinion that the deviance ratings of subjects represents something quite different at each grade level. Fourth grade deviance ratings were more a response to the aggression component than to the loss of control component of the story, whereas we would maintain that the reverse was true for eleventh graders, with seventh graders responding more like the fourth graders than the eleventh graders.

Let me summarize these findings and then integrate them with some things we know about social judgment and social perception from other developmental research. First of all, we found that seven year olds had great difficulty making deviance judgments. The difficulty lay in placing the behavior of others in a normative framework. These children understand the terms "same" and "different"; they are also able to single out peers whose behavior they dislike This latter fact may actually constitute the central impediment to their making a normative comparison. As is often seen in the moral judgments of children this age, the immediate consequences of the other child's behavior is so central to their thinking, they have difficulty decentering from these consequences and considering that behavior in a larger social context. Thus, for instance, they do not consider whether the child in question is aggressive toward many other

children also, as is the case for 10 and 13 year old subjects, but simply focus on the fact that this child picks on them.

Children in the middle school years--4th graders and many 7th graders--were able to make normative comparisons, but these comparisons dealt largely with grossly observable behavior. That is, unlike 11th graders, there was no explicit focus on deviance as a failure to fit in with the group itself, but instead they focused on the violations of behavioral rules and codes.

For 17 year olds, deviance is truly a social construct. Not only is the judgment normatively based, but the content of deviance is focused on social awareness and social facility. This sensitivity to the way most people think and feel is matched by their ability to come to conceive of non-normative internal states--disorder and irrationality. We see in this group the emergence of a new form of social judgment (or at least the capability for such a judgment)--the judgment that another person fails to match up to a social criterion for psychological stability. This judgment reflects important changes in social perspective-taking ability. Not only can other persons be considered as having different perspectives from oneself, but other persons can be considered to have a non-normative perspective, that is they can be conceived of as perceiving a different set of facts because of their psychological perspective and not merely because of having a different physical perspective.

In summary, there appear to be at least three stages in the development of the perception of social deviance: The first stage entails self-referenced social judgments that are primarily consequence based. The second stage

involves judgments that are group referenced and incorporate data on the intentions of the other. There is, however, a heavy emphasis on the rules that apply to overt acts. In the third stage, judgments about social deviance are group referenced, but the emphasis is less on rules governing specific acts and more on the nuances of social encounter and on the shared perception of social reality that makes social consensus possible. Thus there is in this stage a kind of thinking about the other's thoughts which is essential to making judgments about psychological disorder.

Two kinds of changes would seem to underlie the transitions in social perspective just described--changes in reasoning processes and changes in experiences with social norms. We will conclude by saying something about our analysis of the changes in experience with social norms. The early school age child is predominantly focused on the overt aspects and consequences of behavior. He has had relatively little experience with peer group norms and in all likelihood he, himself, has been dealt with by others chiefly on the basis of his overt behavior. Consequently, the norms of the early school age child deal with the goodness or badness of specific overt acts and their consequences. The adolescent, on the other hand, has had much broader experience with social norms. The norms of adolescence, as is true for adult life, are usually situation-specific. That is, certain behaviors can be considered appropriate responses to one set of circumstances but not to others. As a consequence, adolescents are increasingly able to recognize whether or not a particular set of circumstances evoked an actor's response or whether

the actor's response was determined by factors idiosyncratic to the actor. It is this capacity that is fundamental to the attribution of disorder.

There is an irony to the developmental pattern of attribution that we have described. Much of the current developmental research on social cognition has focused on the progress of the child toward thinking of other persons as stable and predictable--that they possess traits. In this present work we have extended this progression to the point at which other persons can be considered to be characterized by a new trait or characteristic, that is, that they are unstable and unpredictable--disordered.

Table 1

Categories of Perceived Deviance by Grade Level

Category	Grade				
	1st	4th	7th	11th	Total
Aggression	9	11	9	4	33
Social norm Violations	3	11	12	11	37
Adult Rule Violations	1	9	2	2	14
Social withdrawal	0	1	2	10	13
Interest and Appearance	1	2	4	4	11
Self-referent attributions	8	1	3	0	12
Non-scorable (irrelevant response)	5	1	1	0	7
Totals	27	36	33	31	127

Table 2

Recognition of Loss of Control and Distorted Perspective

by Grade Level

Story Condition	First Grade	Fourth Grade	Seventh Grade	Eleventh Grade
Loss of Control				
Reconstruction	18	12	8	2
Transition	0	3	4	3
Recognition	1	5	8	13
Distorted Perspective				
Reconstruction	18	12	12	1
Transition	2	6	4	2
Recognition	0	2	4	17

Note: There were three incomplete protocols for the Loss of Control story; thus there are two fewer eleventh grade S's and one less for the first grade.

Table 3

Mean Deviance Ratings for Standard Stories

for Grade x Sex

Story Condition	Fourth Grade	Seventh Grade	Eleventh Grade	Grand Mean
Loss of Control				
Males	3.300	3.100	3.600	3.325
Females	4.100	3.100	2.400	3.675
Grand Mean	3.700	3.100	3.000	3.367
Distorted Perspective				
Males	1.700	2.300	4.300	2.925
Females	2.100	3.500	4.200	2.975
Grand Mean	1.900	2.900	4.250	2.950